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AUTHOR Nutter, Barbara P.
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ABSTRACT

This program combines five distinct parts of the teacher training program into a unified experience for undergraduate social studies students. It offers some unique opportunities for ongoing involvement of university students in the improvement of their own instruction. Three academic courses in conjunction with an optional reading methods course are linked with a field practicum, and this constitutes the block program. The evaluation process consists of three kinds of strategies: (1) counseling and feedback, (2) group rating instruments; and (3) written focused projects. Ongoing counseling in individual conferences raises instructional concerns and determines career goals. Specific areas of concern are readily detected and clarified. Total group evaluation of the block program occurs at the end of the term. Written evaluations include a self-rating list of student competencies, anonymous weekly ratings of faculty, and projects by students as well as oral and written feedback. Ongoing problems are identified and dealt with. (KA)

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BLOCK PROGRAM: Student Involvement in Improvement of Instruction

Barbara P. Nutter
University of Michigan School of Education

"Perhaps these suggestions will not eliminate the grunts and groans of students, but they may make a small improvement in the education learning experience."

-- S. Hoopfer, Block Program, 1977

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The number of alternative approaches in education has increased sharply over the last two decades. One consequence of increased options available to those making educational decisions at all levels is increased interest in the process of change itself. Novel change schemes project widely different conceptions of the students role in learning. The sheer knowledge of alternatives has an effect on the decision making climate in schools and school systems.

The educational technology already exists and instructional approaches are already sufficiently diverse so that attempts to create various mixes of elements could produce a variety of teaching roles. Yet we do not see anything like this variation in actual school practice. The gap between the possible and the actual has become an issue for university faculty. Do we teach for reality or for potential? What tensions will arise between the orientations and sentiments of students and the demands which result from the reality of the marketplace?

One facet of the emerging tension centers on educational evaluation. Students as participants in the evaluation of the teaching learning environment are chronically underutilized. Using students as part of the educational evaluation process can be an attempt to reduce the gap between the possible and the practice in schools. We have found that one obvious consequence of doing this is that students and faculty must cooperate in a context where there is a generalized pressure toward adaptability – adaptability to each other as colleagues and students within the system of public education.

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BLOCK PROGRAM IN SOCIAL STUDIES

The block program in Social Studies Education at The University of Michigan is an exciting example of cooperation as students and faculty learn from each other. It represents a unified approach to teacher education and as such offers some unique opportunities for ongoing involvement of university students in the improvement of their own instruction. Educational Philosophy or Sociology, Educational Psychology and Social Studies Methods are required by The University of Michigan for certification of secondary Social Studies teachers. These three academic courses in conjunction with an optional reading methods course are linked with a required field practicum which places students in secondary schools in the City of Ann Arbor and surrounding communities. These five coordinated courses constitute the block program.

Time Schedule

MONDAY and TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY and THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Philosophy Social Studies Methods Educational Psychology	Field Observation at assigned school	Group Presentations Reading Methods Discussion of Observations

The time schedule used in the block program will begin to display some of the demands of the program. Students are committed to a four hour session per day five days per week. Two days per week are spent in the university classroom. This time is devoted to the theoretical and experiential material identified as part of the three courses. Two days are spent out in various schools in the community observing and interacting with students and teachers. The last day is filled with presentations planned by students, a reading methods course, micro-teaching experiences and finally a thorough discussion of the students' observations and reactions to the school situation. The program is demanding and involves an intensity which is not usually encountered in education training.

The block program is staffed by two senior faculty in the Department of Teacher Education, Social Studies program and by graduate student teaching assistants in the Social Foundations Department and the Educational Psychology Department. The students enrolled in the block program are undergraduates with major concentrations in subject areas such as history, geography, anthropology, political science, psychology, sociology and economics. Approximately one-half of the students are enrolled in the School of Literature and Science and the Arts and the other half are School of Education students completing their educational course work in order to be certified to teach in their subject area in secondary schools.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN EVALUATION

The evaluation process utilized in the block program begins when the student is interviewed by the senior faculty in the Social Studies Department. It is here that students receive their initial orientation as to what the block is and the instructor identifies key information about students. This information is used to plan the initial program. The first phase of the planning and coordination of the block program is started before the beginning of each term when the teaching team meets to discuss questions of organization and procedure for the term. It is in the initial and continuing coordination sessions where questions of subject overlap and concerns, evaluation of students as well as assignment of time schedules and skill building activities are discussed.

Early discussions about involving students in the improvement of instruction arose as a result of a team decision concerning evaluation of students since that decision had to do with what the criteria for a successful block program were – how would we know it was working. The block faculty decided that there were several ways of gauging improvement over time. The evaluation criteria decided on were 1) increased student competency levels in terms of their teaching behavior. Therefore, self-perception ratings of competencies is one method that is used to evaluate instruction and learning in the block program. Another is the 2) direct transfer of training. This kind of behavior can be demonstrated by students

and directly observed by the supervising classroom teachers, some of whom have been supervising student teaching for a number of years in cooperation with the block program. Additional evidence of instructional quality occurs during the student teaching seminar discussions in which the 3) students participate in discussions and demonstrate their knowledge base concerning the three core subject courses that are a part of the block experience.

Students have progressively enlarged their role in the evaluation process of the block program. The discussion of the field experience has openly encouraged a comparative and evaluative viewpoint toward the day to day teaching/learning environment. It seemed quite natural then to expand the evaluation to include the block program itself. The teaching team has struggled to maintain an openness to the experience of the student across a wide range of programs encountered in schools, abilities of students and instructional styles of the team.

Three kinds of evaluation strategies have been built into the organization of the block program to accommodate this large amount of diversity

1) counseling and feedback

2) group rating instruments

3) written focused projects

First, ongoing counseling of students in individual conferences raises instructional concerns and determines career goals. Specific areas of confusion are readily detected and clarified. Students have insisted and faculty either require and/or encourage individual contact throughout the term.

Second, total group evaluation of the block program experience began as a class meeting at the end of the term. In it students were encouraged by staff to openly identify those parts of the experience which proved helpful and those which proved frustrating. The Friday discussion of field experiences openly encouraged a comparative and evaluative viewpoint toward the day to day teaching/learning environment through the term. As a result students and faculty were at ease with each other as well as the concept of

constructive evaluation. It was such a productive interchange that the procedure was incorporated into the following term as a regular part of the evaluation process.

In addition, there are a number of written evaluation strategies used in the process. A self-rating list of student competencies in the area of Social Studies is one mechanism which the student utilizes repeatedly over the span of the student-teaching year to assess their own growth in teaching competencies. An anonymous weekly rating sheet of faculty, turned in by each student, provides suggestions for improvement and points which need to be clarified.

Finally, each term there are a number of evaluation projects researched and conducted by individual students which focus on the process of the block program and the block experience. These projects result in very fine reports which have been submitted to the entire teaching team and indicate a high degree of maturity in critiquing the experience. The gist of the critiques and the recommendations made by the students are compiled for entire team review. Short pieces are duplicated, longer reports are condensed and reported verbally with the recommendations recirculated.

The report segment of the evaluation process has had several equally weighted components. The first is an oral report of the verbal feedback to the entire teaching team. Items such as "we could use another exposure to simulation games," "there is one point in the term where all classes require an assignment – can that be better integrated" are examples of feedback from the total group evaluation. The compiling is usually done at the beginning of the planning process so that reports of recommendations from the prior term are circulated among the teaching team in order to initiate semester planning.

Student projects which are submitted in written form are generally the second part of the process. Students repeatedly challenged the need for redundant material and requested more coordination between courses. Questions were raised about the discrepancy between the "reality" of schools and the course materials. One member of the teaching team has assumed responsibility for analyzing the critiques. The analysis of the total coordinating effort showed that the integration which we did at the beginning of the term should be

repeated at stated intervals. Therefore, one of the teaching team proposed a program change to the planning group based on some of the student recommendations.

Third, the report segment is completed by feedback to students in their student teaching seminar. In this way it is felt that the reporting process incorporates the instructional staff as well as the student participants. Both student and staff initiate and receive feedback from the other about the experience which they have shared for the term.

An interesting and perhaps unusual, but nevertheless valid measure, of instruction is the number of students who reach a decision not to enter the teaching profession. I'm not speaking of the student who is experiencing academic difficulty as much as I am the student who is ambivalent about teaching as a career choice. The block experience with its quality of intensity and total submersion in education as an experience provides the first opportunity for a student to experiment with themselves in a teacher oriented role in the context of the education profession. So if a student who is truly ambivalent about teaching reaches a firm decision as to "Yes, I will be a teacher," or "No, I have decided not to enter the teaching profession," that would be considered evidence of instructional success.

PROBLEMS

There have been a number of ongoing problems identified by both faculty and students. These provide enough dissatisfaction to both stimulate and maintain interest in continued efforts at improvement of instruction.

The most frequently expressed problem from the perspective of a new student is one of time. Many students feel that a four hour commitment every day is an extremely large amount of time to devote to the block program. It represents only half of the registered course load for some students. Some complain that four hours in the same building is restrictive. These expectations are based on academic course work outside of Education. It reflects the naivete of students' attitude to the demands of teaching.

This problem of time is stated differently when the student assumes a different perspective. Students begin to identify the need for more time as they gain experience in

the classroom. The continuing problem, as expressed by students, is that because of its intense nature 4 hours in the block is not considered adequate time for discussion. The interchanges that some feel necessary, e.g. broader reading, gathering resources and personal discussions are missing. These students don't think that there is enough time put into the block program.

Student concern has also been expressed over the number of required assignments and lack of planning. Students acknowledge this as an age old student complaint but state that an integrated program could pace and space assignments with proper staff planning. Some redundancy in assignments was pointed out in the evaluations.

Some students have requested experiences in urban schools and community programs. They recognize their need for exposure to additional programs. Information about drugs and violence are being requested. Both issues are of concern in schools and students want to be able to respond with facts not fantasy.

Many do not consider the number of hours available in the block to be an adequate preparation for student teaching. The university limit on coursework which applies toward graduation is seen as confining rather than adequate.

Faculty concerns included team efforts as well as student learning. Close attention to team work is required. Not every individual instructor is comfortable or works best as part of an instructional team. It is a constant struggle to arrange adequate meeting time to plan, coordinate, argue and encourage each other. The teaching team has reached the point of accepting the additional time as an integral part of this teaching assignment.

Another team concern was individual identification or territoriality concerning course material. Team discussions in this area required a lot of sensitivity, good will and sense of give and take. The block program faculty has been very successful in working through some of these issues. In one instance a methods instructor relinquished adolescence as a topic area because it was already included prominently in the psychology course. Another example occurred when a psychology assignment was viewed as being within the realm of philosophy. For one term the paper was used as a philosophy requirement. During

evaluation of this assignment schedule the faculty team reconsidered this assignment. It was decided that, given the combined interests of the team and the quality of student papers, this assignment would be adopted as a general block assignment for three courses rather than one. This decision eliminated two required papers from the assignment list.

Finally, student confusion with terminology is a matter to be clarified at the faculty as well as the student level. Coordination of assignment schedules revealed minor variations in labels that we used for common concepts. Discussion of the differences gave each of the teaching team sufficient information about the other instructor's terms to clearly label for students those points which had been confusing in the past.

In summary, the block program at The University of Michigan combines five distinct parts of the teacher training process into a unified experience for undergraduate Social Studies studnets. It uses a team approach which relies substantially on students reactions and evaluations at all stages of planning and involves faculty in reporting back to students. The problems identified by students are concerned with 1) too much time invested 2) lack of coordinated assignments 3) need for more information concerning various issues 4) lack of time for discussion 5) university limitations on course-work as confining. The problems identifed by faculty are concerned with 1) planning time 2) integration of course material 3) clarification of terminology.

These are some of the tensions rising from this kind of student involvement in improvement of instruction. The use of students as part of the educational evaluation process has permitted open discussion between faculty and student about the gap separating the possible and the practice in education. Both students and faculty have proven to be somewhat adaptable to each other as colleagues and students.